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CHILD WELFARE IN *Newsletter* PROGRESS

We are pleased in this issue of the Newsletter to focus on a number of initiatives being undertaken in Alberta's Native communities to bring about improved services to families and children.

"Alberta Social Services and Community Health is focussing on Native families and children in its child welfare services. The need for this special attention was verified by departmental statistics and by a growing awareness that Indian and Metis people want greater involvement in the case planning for Native children as well as in the actual administration of child welfare services.

During 1983, the Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council entered into an agreement with the federal and provincial governments whereby the Council will ultimately assume the statutory responsibilities for child welfare services for member bands in accordance with provincial child welfare legislation. Alberta's Child Welfare Act facilitates the delegation of statutory authority, powers and duties. Thus, the Lesser Slave Lake Regional Council and other Indian and Metis agencies have the support of the Child Welfare Act in their endeavours toward self administration of child welfare services.

In 1985, the Blackfoot Tribe renewed its agreement for the same purpose. The Blackfoot Social Services Society was established and will be given full authority in law to administer child welfare services.

The 1980s will likely form an era in Canadian and Alberta history where Native communities seek a return of functions from government to the community with a special focus on prevention and early intervention, as well as on the utilization of Native resources which allow for incorporation of Indian and Metis cultural values and customs. In the words of Russell Wright from the Blackfoot Tribe 'it is not a question of going back, but of moving our values forward.'"

BALDWIN REICHWEIN

Act Recognizes Cultural Heritage

A major innovation in Alberta's Child Welfare Act is its recognition and emphasis on cultural heritage of families and children. "Such recognition is important generally," says Baldwin Reichwein, Special Advisor on Native Issues, Alberta Social Services and Community Health, "but it means even more in relationship to the Indian and Metis families and children requiring services under the Act."

The Act now allows for delegation of duties and powers under the Act to persons and agencies outside the public service, i.e., enabling Native communities to pursue the development of community-based child welfare services.

To expedite such development, Reichwein said a Working Committee on Native Child Welfare was appointed by the Minister of Social Services and Community Health. This committee's mandate is to make recommendations to the Minister of Social Services and Community Health and the Minister of Native Affairs concerning short, as well as long-range strategies in the interest of Native child welfare services. The committee collaborated in the development of **Native Child Welfare Services Practice Guidelines**. These guidelines are meant to assist staff in modifying their practices to conform with the familial, social, spiritual and cultural heritage of Alberta's Native people and communities.

"The Act recognizes the value of the family; the guidelines elaborate on the existence and commitment of the extended family in the Native community, where the family can include blood relatives as well as other relationships developed in a Native cultural milieu. When protective services are to be provided to a Native family, the guidelines stress the involvement of Native community

"Guidelines Assist Staff"

"Involve Native Community"

resources, especially those who understand and support local Native customs and values," he said.

According to Reichwein, the objective is to develop a case plan in the overall context of the child's culture, and to ensure that, where possible, the Native child remains in, or returns to, the Native community.

"The legislative requirements for consultation with Indian chiefs, councils, or designates are already resulting in improved working relationships with Indian communities, especially where meaningful rapport is established with the Indian community."

The Working Committee on Native Child Welfare strongly recommends that similar collaboration take place concerning Non-Status Indians and Metis. "The spirit of this recommendation has been expressed in the guidelines," Reichwein said.

He continued, "The Act emphasizes, for example, the adoptive parents of an Indian child are required to inform the child of its status and rights to which it is entitled, and that its heritage be explained to the child from early years onward, and the guidelines interpret this to be translated, for example, into opportunities to allow an Indian child to participate in cultural activities traditionally experienced by Indian people. Some Indian communities have indicated a willingness to develop special cultural programs for adoptees and adoptive families or Indian youths and adults who grow up away from the reserve.

"The department has committed itself, since the implementation of the Child Welfare Act: to provide programs and services for Native families and children, with considerable emphasis on community-based services; to preventive service models and approaches; to cross-cultural training of departmental staff and of caregivers; and to recruitment and training of Native staff for the delivery of community-based services to Native communities.

"In all six departmental regions, initiatives are in progress or under development that focus on the unique needs of Native communities, families and children. Likewise, Indian as well as Metis leaders and communities are indicating a strong interest in assuming greater administrative responsibility for the delivery of services."

Understanding Cultural Differences Helps

Foster parents who will be caring for Native children are able to attend classes and obtain information that will help them understand the differences between non-Native and Native cultures and thus avoid or lessen difficulties which could arise. The classes are primarily intended to provide non-Native foster parents with information which will help them deal with problems which stem from differing cultural values and expectations.

This pilot project, undertaken by the Southwest District Office of the Edmonton Region, Alberta Social Services and Community Health, is helping Edmonton-area foster parents understand the importance of keeping Native children in touch with their natural heritage and traditional values. "These training sessions are available to any foster parent who would like to attend," says May Couchman, Education Coordinator for foster parents.

"In our regular orientation program for prospective and new foster parents we include one training session which deals with Native children," she says. "And every other month a special orientation session on Native culture is presented."

"Who is a Native? What are the differences?"

Two Native Resource Workers have been hired as part of the pilot project. They take an active part in consultations relating to Native issues. The Native Resource Workers participate fully in the orientation sessions, as well as offering support and training to families and foster children.

The orientation session is designed to provide non-Native foster parents with information to help them understand Native children. They are also given information on Native resources and educational materials available.

"Child-rearing ranges from traditional to contemporary"

"We start off with 'Who is an Indian?' " says Flora Piche-George, one of the Native Resource Workers, "and the differences - legal, hereditary, Status, Non-Status, Inuit, Metis."

The session includes discussion of what has happened to Native people in Canada; of attempts to assimilate Natives into dominant society; about Native child welfare; and about traditional Native parenting techniques.

Today, Native child-rearing ranges from traditional to contemporary, according to Ms. Piche-George. "A child coming from a Northern reserve, an isolated area, will be brought up very differently from a child being brought up in downtown Edmonton. But in some ways you'll have similarities. You have some basic characteristics that are the same."

Ms. Piche-George explained: Traditionally, Native families have had a different set of values and standards than mainstream society. For example, Native children are brought up using a pacifist approach to discipline. Corporal punishment of children was virtually unknown until Europeans arrived. Native children are taught by adult role models. Humor, teasing and community approval are used as socializing techniques. Native culture is very people-oriented. Sharing of time and material goods is highly respected; accumulation of material wealth is seen as anti-social.

Problems occur when Native children are separated from their families and culture. They are introduced to new rules and ways of eating, sleeping, playing, and talking. Since many non-Native foster parents don't understand the great differences between the values of the two cultures, Native Resource Workers spend time training foster parents "to interpret certain behaviors," says Ms. Piche-George. For example, a child accused of being stubborn, may actually be confused and "lost," because he comes from an environment where Native parents don't try to make a child do what he doesn't want to do.

"Stubborn child may be confused, lost"

She also points out the availability of "Native helping agencies, where foster parents can take their Native children and let them participate in Native activities."

Education Coordinator, May Couchman says many resource materials are available to foster parents. Included are periodicals, story books, and films. "We have quite a long list of these materials," says Ms. Couchman. "Another good source of information is your public library," she adds.

Native Communities Provide Own Services

Alberta's Indian bands and Metis communities have a serious interest in the welfare of their children, but until Alberta's Child Welfare Act was proclaimed in 1985, only Alberta Social Services and Community Health had the legal authority to administer child welfare services.

The Child Welfare Act now allows for the delegation of certain powers and duties to Native agencies or societies for local administration of services. The development of Native child welfare services is being discussed with many Native groups throughout the province.

Native people wanting to control services for their own people is not a new aspiration, says Baldwin Reichwein, Special Advisor on Native Issues, Alberta Social Services and Community Health. "To take care of their own has been the intent of child welfare services and the thrust of the Native community for a long time. However, it's only recently that provincial child welfare legislation facilitates it. Native people want to assume more responsibility, legislation facilitates it, and the Department of Social Services and Community Health is encouraging it."

Reichwein, along with regional advisors, were assigned to act as resource personnel to assist Native communities and groups in the development of proposals covering services for Native communities. These government employees operate as a team. They have initiated discussions with Native bands, Non-Status Indian groups, and Metis communities, and are available to assist at all stages during the development of Native child welfare services. They collaborate with Indian Affairs, Northern Development Canada officials in relationship to Status Indians.

Internal to the department, a Native Child Welfare Negotiations Support Team chaired by Assistant Deputy Minister John Lafrance was established in the summer of 1985. "It's role," says Reichwein, "is to coordinate the three to five year planning process to facilitate the transfer of child welfare authority to Native communities."

Approximately two dozen individuals are involved in this project to examine all aspects of the issues, according to Reichwein. "They keep informed concerning progress of the many implications of the transfer process."

The development of family and children's services for Native people involves Native groups, the Alberta government, and the federal government. "Native people may assume responsibility under provincial legislation to function as private agencies," explains Reichwein.

The Blackfoot Indian Band has already assumed full authority and responsibility for it's own services under the new Act. In December, 1985, the Blackfoot Band and the Alberta and Canadian governments renewed this country's first tripartite child welfare agreement. Under the new agreement, the newly incorporated Blackfoot Social Services Society will be given complete responsibility for child welfare services on the reserve beginning in the month of April.

The Blackfoot Social Services Society will direct and manage child welfare services. In addition, the band can sign a bilateral agreement with Alberta allowing band members living off reserve, access to Blackfoot Social Services.

The Blackfoot agreement has proven to be very successful, according to Reichwein. "Children are cared for on the reserve and nurtured in their own cultural environment. Very few children leave the reserve for child welfare services, whereas when the agreement began in 1973, almost 150 Blackfoot children were in temporary guardianship, most of them in non-Native foster homes off reserve," he said.

The Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council, is moving swiftly in the same direction, says Reichwein, and their agreement promises to be similarly effective. "This Indian Regional Council has been getting ready to assume responsibility and authority under the new Act. The transfer of authority is to take place during the month of April. The Lesser Slave Lake Council has developed community resources and trained its staff."

According to Reichwein, the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency is also preparing to assume responsibilities for its own services, and discussions and negotiations are taking place with several other Indian bands.

The Metis Children's Services Society signed an agreement with the Edmonton Region which will gradually lessen the government's responsibility for providing direct services to Metis children. The Society is in the first phase of providing social services to Edmonton area Metis children and families.

Its long-term goals include taking over some services for Metis children and families and to reduce the number of Metis children in care; to improve the effectiveness of services to Metis children and families; and to develop and provide programs that will strengthen and preserve the Metis family unit.

Committee Works for Native Child Welfare

The Working Committee on Native Child Welfare, established in December of 1984 by the Minister of Social Services and Community Health, is responsible for making recommendations on strategies concerning matters pertaining to Native child welfare. The purpose of the committee is to ensure that Native issues and Native families are considered in the implementation of the Alberta Child Welfare Act.

The committee examined child welfare services as they relate to Native children, and identified concerns for which they made short-range recommendations.

To date, the committee lists among its accomplishments:

- Assisted in the development of **Native Child Welfare Practice Guidelines**, which have been approved and distributed to child welfare staff and Native communities.
- Suggested that more Native people be brought into social services at the community level and be provided training, which is resulting in a Native training/recruitment initiative.
- Recommended that an increased number of Native social workers be hired by the department. According to Baldwin Reichwein, Special Advisor on Native Issues, "during the last fiscal year, the department set out to recruit and hire an additional 60 Native employees. That goal is close to being achieved, and the Native recruitment commitment is a continuing one."
- The committee recommended that the department undertake a study in permanency planning. This is being followed up by Alberta Social Services and Community Health as a special project.
- The committee is presently undertaking community consultations before submitting long-range strategies to the Minister of Social Services and Community Health, and the Minister of Northern Affairs. These consultations are being conducted throughout the province, in and with Native communities.

Joint Venture Spurs Cooperation Between Educators and Social Workers

Teachers, students, and parents will soon receive information kits that explain how Alberta's Child Welfare Act affects them. The kits contain information specific to these different groups. They were prepared as a joint venture between the Department of Education and Alberta Social Services and Community Health.

"Teachers used to acting in parent role"

Alberta Social Services and Community Health compiled information kits for various groups shortly after the Act became legislation last July. The kits contain general information on the history and background of the Child Welfare Act, and more specifically, define many of the terms of the Act, and explain the role of the Office of the Children's Guardian. There is also information contained in the kits of specific interest to various groups affected by the Act, such as law enforcement, residential and service agencies, Native groups, and foster parents. But according to Peggy Garritty, special assistant to the Deputy Minister of Education, there was nothing aimed specifically at teachers, students, and parents. "We felt that it was important that they be well informed about the Act and how it applies to them," says Ms. Garritty

The kits are intended to inform those most closely associated with the education system about the Act and what it means. "There has been some uncertainty among social workers, teachers and parents, about their joint relationships to a child," says Ms. Garritty. "Teachers are used to acting in a parent role when it comes to situations at school. In some cases, teachers have been reluctant to allow social workers to interview a child in private."

"Essentially," she says, "it's a communications problem as much as anything."

Alf Nobert, Project Manager, Child Welfare Implementation Project, says Alberta Social Services and Community Health hopes the information pamphlets will help schools and school boards better understand the role of social workers, particularly in cases where social workers are being refused access to schools to investigate suspected cases of abuse or neglect.

The teacher's pamphlets will help to explain what their rights and responsibilities are under the Act. The Act makes it clear that anyone who suspects that a child is at risk, for whatever reason, has a responsibility to report the situation. "We want to sensitize teachers to that responsibility," says Ms. Garritty.

When teachers suspect that one of their students is at risk, they can read through the pamphlet to discover what processes to follow for reporting it, who to talk to, and what happens from there.

"Will help understand social worker role"

So that teachers will be aware of what to look for, some signs of child abuse are included. However, the information emphasizes that these signs don't necessarily mean that the child has been abused; rather they should be used as an indicator of possible abuse. Some signs that will be included are:

- frequent tardiness
- reluctance to attend school
- reluctance to go home
- poor nutrition
- complaints of pain
- behavioral changes - withdrawal, aggression

The parent's pamphlet will explain the role of the school in relation to children who are at risk. "The material is designed for parents in general," says Ms. Garritty, "so that parents will have an understanding of the Child Welfare Act."

"This pamphlet will explain to parents what their rights and responsibilities are in relation to the Child Welfare Act. Most parents don't really understand the Act and wouldn't know what their rights and obligations were if their child were reported to Alberta Social Services."

"Parents' pamphlet explains role of school"

Ms. Garritty explained: For example, if you are interviewed by a social worker, you have the right to know why you're being interviewed; you have the right to have the interview conducted in private. If you are called before the court, you have the right to legal counsel; you have the right to cross-examine witnesses; you have the right to appeal. You do not have the right to know who reported you.

The student's pamphlet will explain, within the confines of the Act, what the roles of the teacher and school are; what rights and responsibilities students have; and what procedures to follow if they have been abused or neglected.

"The kits will most probably be aimed at the junior high school level, in terms of language," says Ms. Garritty, "although teachers may use the materials for younger grades."

The kits should be available for distribution by early April, and they will be sent to schools throughout the province, Ms. Garritty said.

By providing this information, the Department of Education and Alberta Social Services and Community Health are hoping to give people a starting place when they wish to pursue various concerns.

If you require additional copies of the Newsletter, or know of an individual or group that would like to receive future issues, please telephone Joyce Gariepy at 422-5187, Edmonton or write to Child Welfare Implementation Project, 9th floor, Seventh Street Plaza, 10030 - 107 St., Edmonton, Alberta T5J 3E4.

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